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Among its other effects, the Pentagon Papers-Watergate era gave us a brand-new principle of journalistic ethics: it's all right to publish anything that you can steal.

An especially troublesome example of this practice popped up the other day in *The Washington Post* — a lengthy story concerning official plans to launch a "covert action" campaign against Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. *The Post* devoted some 45 column-inches to exposing this endeavor, including direct quotations from a "top secret" report from the CIA.

The harm that publication of such material can do to our security interests — and the propaganda bonus it provides our enemies — are obvious on the face of it. That our government (and others) ought to take action against Qaddafi and his global terror network can hardly be doubted. Yet *The Post* had no compunction about blowing this operation in the name of journalistic enterprise.

This performance by *The Post* confirms in retrospect the wisdom of the official decision, two years ago, not to invite the media along to the invasion of Grenada. There were numerous protests at the time that journalists could be counted on to keep security secrets, à la World War II. The Qaddafi episode — along with some other recent happenings — shows otherwise.

The problem here, however, goes beyond the media. All too obviously, somebody in the government not only blabbed to *The Post*, but also provided access to secret documents. The story is replete with references to "sources," "administration sources," "informed government sources," and the like, along with quotations from official reports and correspondence.

Such materials obviously had to come from someone with access to privileged data, either in the executive branch, or the intelligence committees of Congress, or possibly

both. "Government by leak," unfortunately, has become a way of life in the executive, while the large number of congressional staffers who have access to intelligence data has been a matter of continuing concern.

In terms of media and official conduct alike, we now are paying the price for the anti-intelligence frenzy

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of the middle-1970s. In that period, in a supposed effort to remedy abuses, we eviscerated the CIA, hamstringing the FBI, destroyed most of our other security safeguards, and enshrined the notion that anything and everything done by our security-intelligence agencies was fair game for exposure.

I am no knee-jerk apologist for the CIA. When in my view the agency (or a faction within it) has erred, this column has said so. But it should be apparent to anyone with a modicum of knowledge about the world we live in that we urgently need such an agency, and that much of what it does must be kept secret if it is to be effective.

This is particularly so when we reflect that our adversaries include not only the likes of Qaddafi, but the Soviet KGB and various of its East-bloc henchmen. These practitioners of terror, espionage, and disinformation must laugh up their sleeves when elements in our government and media torpedo an operation like the plan against Qaddafi.

Given our laws, it is unlikely anyone can or will do anything to *The Post* for publishing these damaging revelations. Nor is this the proper way to approach the matter. Far more to the point is the need to go to the source. The Reagan administration has been plagued by leaks on matters of this type, and many others. Those leaks need plugging. The intelligence committees of Congress are pledged to secrecy on such matters. They should take steps to ensure that pledge is honored.

As for the media, it is time for people in this business to take stock of what we're doing. There is indeed a public "right to know" about the activities of government, and in many cases we should be doing a better job of protecting that right than is now the case.

But blowing authentic national security operations is another matter. In this context, the print-anything-you-can-steal ethic is just plain wrong, and journalists should say so.

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